

Judge Pfau thanked the panel for the “robust criticism that we really need,” and said ethics and accountability were key components of the court interpreter system.

Panelist Nancy Mangold, who serves as a director at the New York State Office of Court Administration in the Division of Court Operations, praised the positive steps taken so far, saying, “Without language access, justice is denied.” She pointed in particular to mandatory English exams for interpreters, a move implemented the last two years following advocacy by Sakhi and other members of the Justice Speaks: Initiative to Ensure Language Access project.

“It created quite a stir,” she said of the change, noting that only 45 percent of those tested passed the exam, but “now [we] have a much more qualified pool of resources for the courts.”

In another positive development, Mangold addressed an issue raised by fellow panelist Dimple Abichandani of Legal Services for New York City, who sought clarity on the meaning of a part of Court Rule 217 that says court users could waive rights to an interpreter if they provide their own. Mangold indicated Judge Pfau has drafted a memo to be delivered within a week providing further guidance on that clause.

Stressing the importance of training for attorneys—a need highlighted by the Sakhi survey—Sanctuary for Families Community Law Project Director Vivian Huelgo said it was essential to communicate to court users in “plain, simple English.”

“I really have shifted my focus on attorneys and judges,” she said, adding that greater judicial training and awareness would enable interpreters to perform their jobs better. The Sakhi survey showed that most court interpreters believed attorneys and judges need more training on using interpreters’ services: two-fifths disagreed with the view that judges were trained on how to best use their services, and more than half disagreed with the view that attorneys were trained to use their services.

Lionel Bajana, an interpreter with the Bronx County Hall of Justice who has more than a decade of experience, concurred. “Once you become a judge, it becomes difficult to train you,” he said to laughter.

He also seconded Sakhi’s recommendation that interpreters receive ongoing training and support in order to stay effective, suggesting a mentoring program led by seasoned interpreters to help newer ones. “Two essential elements for having good interpreters are education and experience,” he observed.

For a copy of Sakhi’s survey, and a copy of our preliminary report, please go to:
www.sakhi.org/about/Survey.php.